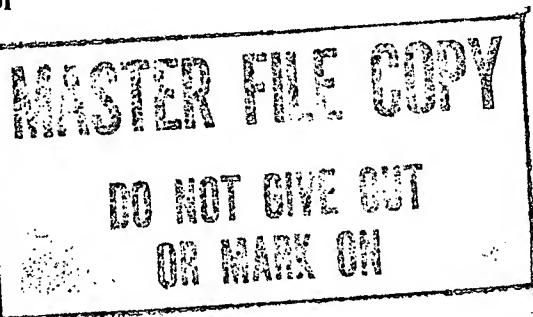




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# China: Managing the Soviet Threat

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An Intelligence Assessment

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November 1983

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# **China: Managing the Soviet Threat**

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

This paper was prepared by [redacted]  
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may be directed to the Chief, China Division, OEA,  
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**China:  
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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 1 November 1983  
was used in this report.*

The Chinese remain deeply suspicious of Soviet intentions and genuinely concerned about the long-term implications of expanding Soviet power. They see themselves as the focus of Soviet strategy in Asia, which they describe as "offensive," aimed at controlling northeast Asia, driving out the United States, and encircling China both politically and militarily. We believe the Chinese are acutely aware of their weak and vulnerable position relative to both of the superpowers—especially the USSR. Chinese preoccupation with the Soviet threat is evident in the assertion by the Chinese that they share a common interest with the United States in opposing Soviet expansion in some areas and, thus, that they cannot follow an equidistant course between the superpowers.

Despite its concern over encirclement, Beijing regards the Soviet military presence on its borders as less of an immediate threat than a form of intimidation intended to influence Chinese policy and to reduce Chinese influence in the region. We believe Beijing has, for a variety of reasons, concluded that a Soviet military attack is highly unlikely and that the threat does not now require a substantial increase in military spending.

In our view, a combination of factors relating to China's security led to this reassessment; the following appear to be most important:

- An assessment that internal economic and political constraints on Moscow would weigh against Soviet involvement in a land war in China, a conviction that the Soviets are overextended in Afghanistan, and a belief that the Soviets would fear being caught in a two-front war with NATO in the event of hostilities with China.
- Evidence of a buildup of US military forces in the Pacific, which serves to counter Soviet military increases.
- Clear Soviet concern about closer Sino-US relations, especially following the visits of Secretaries Baldridge and Weinberger.
- A growing confidence in the deterrent value of Chinese conventional and strategic forces, strengthened in recent years by the modernization program, and in China's defense strategy, which promises a long, hard fight to any potential aggressor.
- A judgment that Soviet forces now on the northern border are insufficient to take and hold a sizable portion of China.

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We believe Beijing is also taking deliberate measures to avoid provoking the Soviets and to reduce tensions along the border:

- Despite the lack of significant progress in the Sino-Soviet consultations that began last year, Beijing has continued the discussions and views them as a useful means of easing tensions.
- China is no longer publicizing military exercises that might be construed as anti-Soviet, such as the large and highly publicized exercise in 1981 north of Beijing.

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The Soviet threat has had a major impact on the thinking of Chinese military officers who must prepare the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for a possible Soviet attack. Development and acquisition of new weapons, training, and tactics and strategy are heavily influenced by China's knowledge of Soviet capabilities. To defend against an attack the Chinese are focusing on relatively inexpensive antiaarmor and antiaircraft weapons, development of combined-arms tactics and forces to cope with superior Soviet mobility and firepower, and improvement of measures to enable forces to survive during the first critical days of combat.

Beijing showed in its 1979 invasion of Vietnam that it was willing to take risks in order to challenge Soviet expansion in Asia. We believe the Chinese will continue to take tough political and diplomatic stands on important regional security issues, but a mix of factors makes a large-scale Chinese assault unlikely:

- Vietnam's massive military buildup of border forces since 1979 mitigates against a replay of China's first invasion in which Chinese troops made shallow penetrations along the entire frontier.
- Beijing's desire and need for a prolonged era of peaceful relations with its neighbors in order to modernize the economy will make China approach potentially volatile situations with caution.

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There are, however, circumstances that could well lead Beijing to mount another punitive attack on Vietnam—the most likely would be in response to an escalation of Vietnamese military activity that threatened Thailand:

- China could mass its air, ground, or naval forces and strike a specific area or targets in Vietnam in such a way as to have the military advantage.
- The most likely targets would be strategically or economically important facilities such as the coalfields in the northeast, but China could also exploit its naval advantage by mounting an amphibious operation against one or more Vietnamese-held islands in the Spratlys.

In our view, the persistence of Soviet military pressure on China and the lack of indications of a willingness to concede on any of China's preconditions for improved relations will continue to nudge Beijing closer to Washington. We believe such a leaning is not inconsistent with Beijing's independent foreign policy line which accepts a tilt toward the United States on the basis of a shared interest in opposing the Soviets. In our judgment, however, barring a collapse in the Sino-Soviet talks and a sudden increase in tensions, China will scrupulously avoid steps—such as signing formal defense commitments—that could jeopardize its ability to manage the Soviet threat unilaterally.



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**China's Perception of the Soviet Threat**

**Policy Shifts**

The Chinese are entering the mid-1980s with no signs of a diminution of the Soviet buildup of military capabilities in Asia that has gone on for over 15 years. During that time Beijing, from a position of military inferiority, has observed the varying pace and extent of Soviet expansion in the region and has adjusted its foreign and defense policies accordingly. We believe the adjustments are Beijing's means of managing the Soviet threat in order to maintain China's security and independence while preserving a peaceful setting for national modernization.

Although a cause-and-effect relationship tying Chinese actions to Soviet military developments is not apparent in every case (important economic and political factors were also at work), there has been a strong correlation between the two:

• **1968-71.**

- Soviets appear aggressive to China following the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the military buildup on the Sino-Soviet border and in Mongolia, and the strong reaction to the border crisis with China.
- China, worried about the imminence of war, steps up defense production to record levels, redeploys armies to the north, and breaks from strict diplomatic isolation with the beginning of substantive contacts with the United States.

• **1972-77.**

- The pace of Soviet military expansion along the border slows down; Soviets await a positive change in Chinese attitude following the death of Mao.

— China talks less of the imminence of war, sharply reduces defense production, slows the fortification of the northern front, continues normalization of relations with the United States, and maintains ongoing but unproductive border talks with the Soviets.

• **1978-81.**

— The Soviet buildup in the Far East resumes and includes construction of SS-20 bases, deployment of Backfire bombers, establishment of a new high command, modernization of the Pacific Fleet, and a friendship treaty with Vietnam plus military aid to Vietnam in exchange for air and naval basing rights, and Afghanistan is invaded.

— China establishes formal relations with the United States, breaks off new border talks with the Soviets in response to the invasion of Afghanistan, invades Vietnam as a challenge to the Soviet-backed Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea, institutes a new buildup of its northern defenses, and talks of a united front of strategic cooperation with the United States and Japan against the USSR.

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Since 1982 the Soviets have continued to threaten China by modernizing their forces in the Far East, adding new ground force units, and deploying additional SS-20 missiles. But Moscow has added no ground force divisions in Mongolia since 1979, which is also the year of the last major Soviet military exercise along China's borders; and, although their use of air and naval facilities in Vietnam has expanded, the Soviets have not supplied the Vietnamese with sophisticated equipment that would enhance their

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capabilities against China.

During the same period, Beijing readjusted its relationship with the USSR and the United States. Last year China proclaimed an "independent" foreign policy and strongly reemphasized its intent to remain largely self-sufficient in defense modernization. It has stopped calling for a united front and last year began high-level talks with the Soviets aimed at normalizing relations. The Sino-US relationship, which cooled off in 1981 over the issue of arms sales to Taiwan, has recently warmed up. The communique signed in 1982 established an understanding on arms sales to Taiwan, and both sides have made efforts in 1983 to smooth out bilateral irritants over trade and the transfer of US technology to China. As a result of Defense Secretary Weinberger's visit to Beijing in September 1983, the two sides have agreed in principle to exchange military missions beginning in 1984, and the United States has offered China the opportunity to buy defensive weapons, such as antitank and antiaircraft missiles.

#### Description of the Threat

The Chinese remain deeply suspicious of Soviet intentions and genuinely concerned about the expansion of Soviet power. This is true despite Beijing's announcement last year that it had adopted a policy to establish a more balanced relationship with the United States and the Soviet Union. The opening of consultations with the Soviets toward normalizing relations and the gradual improvement over the last year in Sino-Soviet trade and cultural exchanges have not been accompanied by any softening of China's hostility toward the Soviets. Instead, at the highest levels of the party and in the Foreign Ministry, there persists a well-formulated and widely accepted perception that the Soviets pose the greatest long-term threat to China:

- In a speech early this year on China's foreign policy concerns, Vice Foreign Minister Yao Guang told his audience that, in Beijing's view, the Soviet Union would continue its worldwide offensive throughout the 1980s.
- The Chinese Foreign Ministry recently reiterated Beijing's view that the Soviet Union is the main threat to China and to Asia and concluded that any attack in the region would be made by the USSR.

Specifically, the Chinese see themselves as the focus of Soviet strategy in Asia, which they describe as "offensive," aimed at controlling northeast Asia, driving out the United States, and encircling China both politically and militarily. In that regard, they link Soviet military and political ties to India, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the ongoing Soviet military buildup and modernization on China's northern border, the expansion of the Soviet Navy in the Pacific, and Soviet support of Vietnam and the expanding Vietnamese presence in Indochina. As a measure of their concern, the Chinese take account of these conditions in setting preconditions for normalizing relations with the Soviets: reduction of forces along the Sino-Soviet border and in Mongolia, an end to Soviet support of Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea, and withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan

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The encirclement concept has become the hallmark of Beijing's portrayal of Soviet designs against China. It not only reflects real concerns but it conveniently unifies in one idea the military and political aspects of China's case against the Soviet Union—the trend, extent, and offensiveness of Soviet expansion. It also has great propaganda utility because it is supportable by objective criteria; places the Soviets on the defensive; and, for world and local opinion, it puts China—a weaker power—in the sympathetic position of a victim of Soviet expansion. In talks with Western and Asian officials, the Chinese rarely miss an opportunity to raise the encirclement concept.

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Soviets who they say now directly threaten China on two fronts.

**The Northern Border.** The Chinese dedicate the bulk of their air and ground forces to defense against the Soviet threat on their northern border. They are vulnerable there with the industrial northeast surrounded on three sides by Soviet forces, the capital only some 600 kilometers from the Mongolian border, and the vast territories of the northwest only lightly defended. Beijing knows that the Soviets have some 50 well-armed and highly mobile divisions and over 2,000 combat aircraft arrayed for use against China. Chinese spokesmen are concerned about the deployment to the Far East of 108 SS-20 missiles capable of hitting targets in China and are aware that the expansion of the Pacific Fleet has made it the largest in the Soviet Navy.

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**Afghanistan.** The Chinese view the Afghan issue as political rather than military. The familiar Chinese stand on Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, as carried in the *People's Daily* in December 1982, is that it represents "a major step in the Soviet global strategy for world domination." More specifically, according to comments in April 1983 by Ma Xusheng, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' senior specialist on the Soviet Union, Soviet strategy in South Asia revolves around its long-term drive to the Indian Ocean. Moscow would not necessarily employ military force but would use political influence as a lever to force out the United States.

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**Vietnam.** Soviet aid to Vietnam and the Vietnamese political and military involvement in Southeast Asia are nettlesome issues to the Chinese. With Moscow's help since the Chinese invasion of 1979, Hanoi has significantly strengthened its northern defenses

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#### Assessment of the Threat

Our assessment of Chinese behavior and statements indicates that Beijing draws a sharp distinction between the long-term threat from Soviet global aspirations and the short-term threat from Soviet forces on China's periphery. We believe the Chinese have become increasingly confident that the Soviet Union poses no immediate threat to China's security.

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Chinese officials have described the air and naval basing rights the Soviets gained in exchange for their assistance as steppingstones for further Soviet expansion. They portray the Vietnamese as proxies of the

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In our view, this perception has gained general acceptance in China over the last few years as a result of careful Chinese analysis of Soviet

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**Chinese Comments on the Soviet Threat, Summer 1983**

*"The Soviet Union is the major threat to China. We have 7,000 kilometers of common border with the Soviet Union and the Soviets intrigue with Vietnam. That is why we say Vietnam must withdraw from Kampuchea. Afghanistan is political encirclement of China, not a military threat. The military threat comes from the Sino-Soviet border, Mongolia, and Vietnam."*

*Huan Xiang,  
senior foreign policy adviser, Chinese Academy  
of Social Sciences*

*"The Soviet threat now is not so imminent. So we are building our economy. . . . But if war broke out tomorrow, we could deal with it. . . . Domestic problems in China would make it more vulnerable. Other than that I see no major threat. I am more confident as each year goes by."*

*Zhang Jingyi,  
Strategic Studies Institute*

*Soviet 'fear of a two-front war and Sino-American cooperation help deterrence. It helps China to have the Soviets fear US aid to China."*

*Yao Wei,  
Institute of International Studies*

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forces opposite China, recent improvements in China's defense posture, an assessment of other factors constraining the Soviets from taking military action, and the growth of US military power.

**Soviet Capabilities**

Chinese military officers and strategists are nearly unanimous in their assessment that Soviet forces along the northern border and in Mongolia are insufficient to take and hold a large portion of northern China. Deng Xiaoping and other officials

have claimed the Soviets

would need three to four times the current number of troops and units to pose a real threat to China and would have to deplete forces opposite NATO in order to achieve the desired ratio. Military region commanders in the northeast and the northwest have told Western defense attaches that the Soviet forces currently on the border are a serious but not overpowering threat and, because only about a third of those units are at full strength, the Soviets would need two to three months to prepare their armies for attack. This would give the Chinese ample warning to reinforce.

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Our own analysis suggests that those are reasonably accurate assessments of the balance along the border,

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The Chinese now play down the likelihood of a Soviet "surgical strike" against strategic targets such as storage sites for nuclear weapons. Zhang Jingyi, head of the Strategic Studies Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), in September 1983 told a US official that the Chinese believe the threat of such an attack has significantly diminished since the Cultural Revolution, when tensions with the Soviets peaked and China's military capability was at its low point.

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**China's Defense**

Although China's forces lack the firepower and mobility of the modern armies arrayed against them, defense officials are confident their manpower reserves, terrain, and strategy of protracted war will deter a Soviet attack. A Chinese military strategist recently noted that, although the Chinese expect to take heavy losses during the early stages of conflict with the Soviets, they believe that "geography, time, and manpower" would turn the tide in China's favor.

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They appear convinced, moreover, that their strategy of "people's warfare" would ensure that a Sino-Soviet conflict would be protracted—a situation they believe the Soviets would want to avoid. [redacted]

The Chinese also appear confident that their small, concealed missile force deters a preemptive nuclear attack by the Soviets. [redacted]

[redacted] Zhang Jingyi noted in August that China's missiles make the Soviets "uncertain" and "sometimes, that is enough."<sup>1</sup> [redacted]

This perception has a bearing on China's approach to Moscow's continuing deployment of SS-20 missiles. [redacted]

[redacted] Huan Xiang—who heads a key central committee foreign policy research group—called the SS-20s "political weapons that are not of much military use." He noted that the Chinese believe SS-20s are targeted on China as well as on Japan and the United States, but that they are no greater threat than existing Soviet ICBMs presumably also targeted against China. Beijing will, of course, continue to press Moscow to reduce its deployment of SS-20s in the eastern USSR. [redacted]

In our view, China's recent success in providing newer weapons to the conventional forces and in its overall program for military modernization has helped to reinforce Chinese confidence in their ability to stand up to the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> Chinese military officers take pride in the advances made in military training, education, and weaponry toward making a truly

<sup>1</sup> The US Intelligence Community agrees with China's assessment of the survivability of its missile force. [redacted]

professional army. We believe the program, spearheaded by Deng Xiaoping, is improving China's fighting capabilities and has generated a renewed esprit de corps in the PLA that has buoyed China's view of its military competence. Although the weapons now in production and development are inferior to modern Soviet weapons, they are well suited to China's defense needs. One official recently commented [redacted]

[redacted] that inferior weapons are not necessarily a disadvantage because sophisticated weapons are soon outdated and the expense often does not justify the return. As one example, [redacted] an antitank gun sometimes is more useful than an antitank missile, citing specifically conditions of poor visibility. [redacted]

#### Other Soviet Constraints

Beijing also believes that the Soviets are deterred from attacking China by vexing problems abroad and at home:

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In our view, the failure of the Soviets to respond militarily to the Chinese invasion of Vietnam was a lesson on deterrence that Beijing still remembers.

The Chinese this year apparently have begun to deemphasize press reporting of military exercises that have anti-Soviet scenarios,

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#### **US Military Power**

The Chinese perceive that the United States is reasserting its military power, and we believe Beijing sees that as a positive development as far as it ameliorates the Soviet threat to China.

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The Chinese assert that they share a common interest with the United States in opposing Soviet expansion and, thus, that they cannot follow an equidistant course between the superpowers. Huan Xiang this summer told [redacted] that, although China "does not want to cooperate with the United States to attack the Soviet Union," the United States and China have a "common interest" in the advancement of security in the western Pacific.

Beijing's move last year to begin a dialogue on normalizing relations was, in our view, intended in part to gain some measure of leverage for easing the Soviet threat.

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#### **Tension-Reducing Measures**

We believe Beijing is taking deliberate measures to avoid provoking the Soviets and to reduce tensions along the border. We view these efforts as signs of China's desire to manage the Soviet threat and to improve the atmosphere in Sino-Soviet relations in order to promote a peaceful environment for Chinese modernization.

#### **Implications**

China will continue to perceive the Soviet Union as its most threatening adversary, we believe, far into the future. Beijing's conviction that military and political

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expansion is an unalterable aspect of Moscow's foreign policy will, over the long term, continue to play a prominent role in China's relations with the Soviet Union and the United States and will be a major factor in China's defense planning and strategy. Barring any sudden unforeseen increase in the immediate Soviet military threat, we believe Beijing will remain confident it can manage the threat and will not be led to act precipitously in its relations with the superpowers.

#### For Defense

The Soviet threat has had a major impact on the thinking of Chinese military officers who must prepare the PLA for a Soviet attack, and we believe that impression is unlikely to change. The military modernization program is aimed, in large measure, at improving training and developing conventional weapons to combat a major Soviet offensive, and we expect that trend to continue, especially in the following areas:

- **Weapons.** The priority items for Chinese development and technology acquisition will be light anti-tank and antiaircraft weapons, which can be produced relatively cheaply and in large quantities, to help offset the threat posed by Soviet superiority in armor and combat aircraft and helicopters. Acquisition of armored vehicles and fighter aircraft will continue, but, because of their expense, they probably will not enter the force in large numbers.
- **Training.** Recent efforts to develop combined-arms tactics, necessitated—we believe—by China's concern about the mobility and firepower of Soviet armies opposite China, will expand to involve more units in the north, and more Army divisions will be mechanized for improved cross-country operations.

We believe China's current moderate and stable level of defense spending is in part a reflection of the perception that the Soviets pose little immediate threat. One aim of Beijing's attempt to reduce tensions along the border almost certainly is to avoid additional justification for the military to demand increases in defense appropriations. Modernization of agriculture, industry, and science and technology holds higher priority in China's four modernizations

than does defense, and we believe Beijing will make every reasonable effort to keep to a minimum the military's competition for state funds.

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#### For Risk Taking

China is not immune to Soviet military pressure, but we believe Beijing would be willing to take certain risks in order to challenge Soviet expansion in Asia. The Chinese appear confident that their own strengths combined with what they see as constraints on a major Soviet attack give them some leeway to take tough stands on important regional security issues, particularly in Southeast Asia. In our view, escalation of Vietnamese military activity in Kampuchea or Laos that spilled over into Thailand and threatened Thai security could lead Beijing to teach Hanoi a "second lesson," but it almost certainly would take a different form than the scenario used in China's first invasion in which Chinese troops made shallow penetrations along the entire Sino-Vietnamese frontier. In order to mount successful punitive actions against Vietnam in the future, we believe the Chinese would have to mass air, ground, or naval forces against one or two specific Vietnamese targets. Beijing's desire and need for a prolonged era of peaceful relations with its neighbors in order to modernize the economy will, nevertheless, at a minimum make China cautious in its approach to situations with the potential for volatile repercussions.

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#### For the United States

In our view, the persistence of Soviet military pressure on China and lack of indications of a willingness to concede on any of China's preconditions for improved relations will continue to nudge Beijing into close company with Washington. We believe such a leaning is not inconsistent with Beijing's independent foreign policy line which accepts a tilt toward the United States on the basis of a shared interest in opposing the Soviets. In our judgment, however, barring a collapse in the Sino-Soviet talks and a sudden increase in tensions, China will scrupulously avoid steps—such as formal defense commitments—that could jeopardize its ability to manage the Soviet threat by and large unilaterally.

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